

Rick Urban Woodturner

Help Desk

If I Had But One Tool

What tools do you really need? That question came up at the last meeting, and it seemed like a good topic for the help desk. Most of the woodturning tools on the shelves or hanging on a pegs in your favorite woodturning store are useful. Most of those, however, are not truly game-changing innovations. They are most often variants of other tools and may or may not be improvements. Most woodturners I know who have been turning a few years have experienced "needing" that latest and greatest invention. Most of the woodturners I know who have been turning more than a few years have discovered they seldom use many of the tools in their shops. Almost all the woodturners I know have a favorite tool or a small number of favorite "go-to" tools. It seems the more you know the less you need.

Disclaimer:

Tool variations can make some operations easier and more efficient, so there is a place for more than a single tool. A skew can be used for beads as well as grooves and flats, but if I'm having a bad day I might as well pick up a spindle gouge and move on.

All right then! How do you decide what tool(s) to get if you can't have them all? If all you have is a hammer, and the only fasteners you use are screws, you probably need a different tool. Likewise, if you only want to turn bowls, that skew in your starter set should not get much use. Therefore, what tool you need is a function of what you want to turn. My pick for that first tool is one that never comes in a "starter set." It is also one that comes in variant shapes that behave differently. My pick is... (drum roll please) ... a bowl gouge. Specifically a bowl gouge with a more narrow, V-like flute, not the one with a very wide flute bottom. (I've had a surprising number of vendors correct me if I call it a V-shaped flute.) Here is my reasoning. I can use a bowl gouge as a spindle roughing gouge, but a spindle roughing gouge shouldn't be used like a bowl gouge because the tang is wimpy and bends too easily. Also, the shape of the spindle roughing gouge flute can be really "catchy" if used as a bowl gouge. The bowl gouge is beefier and can take the beating better than a spindle gouge as it alternates cutting side grain and end grain. I can use a skew to "peel" and "plane" a surface, but I can also present the cutting edge of a bowl gouge to act like the skew for these operations. (Remember my disclaimer.) I often use a scraper to smooth curves and eliminate humps and ridges, but I can also present the cutting edge of a bowl gouge to act like the scraper for at least some situations. A bowl gouge can do grooves, coves, and beads like a spindle gouge; maybe just not quite as small or tight. A bowl gouge can also be used for some hollowing in deeper vessels, but I will admit I rarely pick it up to do that.

I started with the V-like flute so that is what I grew to be comfortable with. I experimented with the wider bottom flute but never perceived a reason to change. In fact, I find the wider flute more "catchy," but that's a very subjective judgment. Of course there are limits to any tool's versatility, but the way you grind the gouge can have a big impact on how well it will work as you approach the frontiers. A review of the different ways to grind a bowl gouge is enough for an entire Help Desk article all by itself. If you don't believe it, ask three experienced turners how to do it and just listen to the resulting discussion. Here is my bottom line for your only (or first) tool. Select a

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traditional tool designed to do the kind of work you want to do. Master that tool. Understand it's limitations. Seek a new tool when... (1) the work you want to do exceeds the limitations of the tool you have, or (2) you need (want) greater efficiency, effectiveness, productivity. When you do decide you need something better, remember to talk with other experienced turners you trust about the pros and cons. Don't simply believe what the manufacturer says about their new and improved, innovative, game-changing solution to all your problems.

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Changing the way you think about wood... one piece at a time.